

**An Argentinian platform workers' union,
the first of its kind in the region,
is fighting for the rights of delivery workers and revitalising
the union struggle**

The *Asociación de Personal de Plataformas (APP)* is organising delivery workers. They are some of society's most vulnerable workers, made even more vulnerable by Covid-19, while simultaneously fighting for the normalisation of their employment relationships and for official recognition as a union.

By Camille Audibert¹

The change came in a matter of weeks. The streets of Buenos Aires were suddenly awash in red, orange and yellow, the colours of the backpacks worn by delivery platform workers, workers who pedal full speed for maximum efficiency. Already well established in other parts of the world, platform companies first appeared in Argentina in 2018, initially in the capital followed by other regions. Over the last two years, Colombian company Rappi, Spanish company Glovo and Uruguayan company PedidosYa have become part of the urban landscape as well as the habits of many consumers, who request the services of thousands of delivery workers at any time of day or night.

But rather than becoming just one more country in the expansion of these multinationals, the unexpected happened in Argentina: the formation in record time of the region's first platform workers' union, the *Asociación de Personal de Plataformas* (the *Platform Personnel Association, APP*). Its trajectory is "both relevant and exceptional," according to a study published by the German foundation Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in September 2020 – *Proudly delivered by APP – The struggle of Latin America's first union for platform workers.*

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“The visibility of working conditions and workers’ demands provided a voice and a critical perspective on the image and discourse of innovation, flexibility, autonomy and entrepreneurship that these companies have been pushing from the moment they arrived,” argues the team of researchers composed of Laura Perelman, Marcelo Mangini, Bárbara Perrot, María Belén Fierro and Martina Sol Garbarz.



In just a few years, platform delivery companies like Rappi have become extremely popular in Argentina. In 2018, platform workers formed the Asociación de Personal de Plataformas (APP) to provide members with a means of collective action as well as support. (Myriam Borzee/Alamy Stock Photo)

From Latin America’s first ‘digital strike’ to the formation of the APP

The spark came when Rappi unilaterally changed its order allocation algorithm. Though the company had been in Argentina for less than six months, discontent among its workers began to grow and soon found expression in several WhatsApp groups created by workers to communicate with one another. With no official meeting place, delivery workers began to gather in the plazas of Buenos Aires, where in July 2018, they decided not to fulfil orders accepted over the application under the pretext of having suffered an accident. This was the highly visible beginning of Latin America’s first ‘digital strike.’

The union’s formation was accelerated by the escalating confrontation between Rappi and a group of spokespersons elected by the delivery workers. While the two parties were holding an informal dialogue over the course of several days, one delivery worker’s account was ‘blocked’ by the company, an action tantamount to termination. It was against this backdrop, in October 2018, that the organisation officially requested registration as a union with the Ministry of Labour.

As the FES report states: “Over the following weeks, APP workers began to receive fewer orders, something [they] interpreted as anti-union behaviour on the part of the company.” Shortly thereafter, in a measure that could be seen as disciplinary, the accounts of several (union-affiliated) delivery workers were definitively blocked, an action that torpedoed the relationship between the union’s spokespersons and the rest of the workers.

One of the blocked accounts belonged to Roger Rojas, the union's secretary general since its inception and one of the most senior platform workers. "The block came as a surprise," says the 35-year-old Venezuelan, whose demographic profile is far from exceptional amongst delivery workers: they are generally young, male and migrants. As Rojas explains, without recognised and transparent dialogue between the workers and the companies, the arbitrary blocking of an account ends up being a threat.

Moreover, the (recently restored) Ministry of Labour's lack of recognition of the APP as a union increases members' vulnerability since they do not enjoy special protection. "We know that being blocked is always a possibility, companies can use any excuse," says Rojas, who now works for competing delivery companies and is listed as a consolidated taxpayer in Argentina's single tax system for small business and individuals.

Legal battle and union revitalisation

In an effort to reintegrate the 'blocked' workers and protect those who chose to join the newly formed APP, the organisation embarked on a legal battle, seeking an injunction before the labour justice system with the crucial help of a team of lawyers providing legal counsel. In the first verdict, the judge ruled that "anti-union conduct" must cease and that Rappi must reinstate the blocked delivery workers. The company refused to do so and appealed. The case remains unresolved.

According to the FES report: "This legal case is of the utmost relevance for the recognition of the rights of workers in this field. Its relevance extends from the normalisation of employment relationships to the recognition of the right of platform workers to unionise and form trade associations that represents them."

Formal recognition of the APP requires proof of its members' employment relationships; the companies, however, refuse to recognise this relationship, instead referring to their workers as 'collaborators' or 'partners.' "Our main objective is regularisation: we must be recognised as workers [...]. That would be a great achievement, for workers here and around the world," says Rojas. Meanwhile, as the APP argues, these workers are working in the informal sector, in a precarious and unprotected environment.

The lack of official recognition may come as a surprise in a country with a high number of trade unions and a high rate of union affiliation for the region. But the APP was born during the neoliberal presidency of Mauricio Macri (2015-2019), which provided a hostile climate for trade unions. As the FES report states: "The absence of union protection reinforced the vulnerability of the collective and its capacity to accumulate organisational

density, deploy collective actions and engage in dialogue and negotiations with companies.”

Without a permanent headquarters or dedicated workplace, and in the midst of a pandemic, organising around the union agenda has become more necessary than ever. Delivery workers are everywhere: they can be seen in small groups, sometimes sitting on the sidewalk, sometimes leaning against the wall of a restaurant waiting for food for their next delivery, now with a mask and social distancing. These moments of respite have been and continue to be vital in establishing union contacts and strengthening the bonds between workers. “We organise using the famous WhatsApp,” says Rojas with a smile. With the creation of the union, workers now have an additional platform for exchange. “It’s very good in terms of its scope and practicality,” says the APP’s secretary general.

For the time being, the delivery workers continue to wait for the court’s ruling. Official recognition of an employment relationship and formal registration of the APP as a union would create a “crucial precedent,” stresses the FES report, which describes the union’s rapid and unconventional trajectory as a possible “model for thinking about new forms of organisation and union action that lay the groundwork for union revitalisation.”

